

Firefighter Contract Is No Help For Budget

Montgomery Trying To Cut Spending

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The Montgomery County Council approved a new contract for firefighters yesterday that allows them to retire five years earlier, a provision expected to cost an additional \$40 million in pension and other benefits over the next three years.

With one member dissenting, the council approved the three-year deal that also calls for pay increases of about 5 percent a year, on top of previously agreed-upon 3.5 percent annual step increases.

The contract with International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1664, which makes members eligible to retire after 20 years' service instead of 25, is the latest chapter in a debate over the size of the county budget.

The council is deliberating how to cut Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan's (D) \$3.6 billion spending proposal for next year so it can reduce the property tax rate and, perhaps, abide by a voter-imposed tax cap for the first time in four years.

But yesterday's lopsided vote illustrates the difficulty Duncan and the council have had in addressing the explosive growth in the county budget, which has increased almost 90 percent in the past decade.

Salaries and retiree benefits for county employees, including teachers, have grown 8 percent over the past year and

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FIREFIGHTERS, *From B1*

account for about four-fifths of the total budget.

While elected officials have little control over certain personnel costs, such as health insurance, pay and retirement packages are squarely within their purview.

"This is our chance to demonstrate fiscal responsibility," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), the only council member to vote against the firefighters' contract. "I believe this a contract that is unreasonable, unwise and unnecessarily expensive."

Andrews also questioned whether Duncan, who is preparing to seek the Democratic nomination for governor, has been too compliant in negotiations with the unions as he tries to win their support. He predicts it's only a matter of time before other county employees' unions also demand the option of retiring at 20 years.

"I think the fire fighters are a special case," countered council member George Leventhal (D-At Large), who said he was inspired to support the contract after seeing "Ladder 49," a movie about firefighters.

David Weaver, a Duncan spokesman, defended the pact.

"The executive has always been supportive of our first responders," Weaver said. "Our firefighters responded to the attack on the Pentagon and they also responded to other horrific events. . . . We believe these men and women have earned our respect and deserve our support."

As leaders of the politically influential firefighters union looked on,

members said the contract would bolster public safety while keeping the firefighter salaries and benefits competitive with area jurisdictions.

"I am not sure how many of us are willing to crawl on our knees through inches of water when you can't see [in a fire]," said council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large). "This job takes guts."

Under the contract, firefighters who retire after 20 years — an option also afforded to those in Prince George's, Howard and Anne Arundel counties but not the District — will be eligible for full benefits and half of their final salary. Firefighters who continue to 25 years can retire with 60 percent of final salary.

The contract represents a sustained effort by Duncan to increase pay in the fire department to recruit and retain qualified employees. Since the last three-year deal, enacted in 2002, IAFF members not at the top of their pay grade saw their salaries increase about a third, according to council analysts.

While higher pay has kept Montgomery relatively competitive with surrounding counties — an entry-level firefighter in Fairfax makes about \$7,000 more annually than one in Montgomery — it is starting to have an impact on the budget.

According to council analysts, the annual cost of funding pensions and benefits for fire department retirements will have tripled between 2000 and 2007.

John Sparks, president of IAFF Local 1664, conceded yesterday that firefighters have fared well during Duncan's tenure.

"I think the county executive has a true understanding of the hazards of our profession," Sparks said.